

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 268

CS 212 418

AUTHOR Honeman, Bob
TITLE Rationale and Suggestions for Emphasizing Afrocentricity in the Public Schools.
PUB DATE Jul 90
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing (Indiana, PA, July 10-11, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Students; Cultural Context; Educational Theories; *Ethnocentrism; High Schools; *Public Education; *Racial Bias; *Rhetorical Invention; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Afrocentrism; Educational Issues; Eurocentrism; Rap Music

ABSTRACT

Public schools are facing the largest crisis in American educational history. More and more minority students are attending public schools, and traditional methods of instruction are failing to meet their needs. The back-to-basics and belt-tightening movements within public schooling are part of a last-ditch effort to support an elitist education which alienates and represses minority students. Critics suggest that Eurocentric thinking (founded in the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato) seek to control the impoverished classes and to maintain dominance in the Western world. These critics call for a new rhetoric in the classroom based on the "Afrocentric idea," which incorporates Black rhetorical devices. These include the call-response process, indirection (the approaching of a subject in a circuitous fashion), styling (the manipulation of language or mannerisms to favorably influence listeners), and appeals to a subjective or emotional sense rather than Eurocentric logic. A twelfth grade English teacher suggests that to learn from the Afrocentric ideal, educators can: (1) bring rap music into the classroom; (2) let the study of rap lead to a study of what the rappers are saying; (3) incorporate Black studies across the curriculum at every educational level; (4) do away with tracking; and (5) allow oral presentations of students' written work. (SG)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED321268

RATIONALE AND SUGGESTIONS FOR EMPHASIZING AFROCENTRICITY IN
THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Bob Honeman
July 9, 1990

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

BOB HONEMAN

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS212418

I make no attempt to speak for my black students; I make no apologies for speaking as a concerned teacher of black students.

Public schools are facing the largest crisis in American educational history. More and more minority students are attending our schools, and traditional methods of instruction are failing to meet their needs. The idea of tightening belts and getting back-to-basics is a last ditch effort in support of elitist education, an idea that has alienated and repressed minority students in the classroom. In fact, the idea of back-to-basics is the central problem in pedagogical thinking. The "basics" represent a status quo or norm, a norm predicated on a homogeneous society and a single vision of truth. These "basics" presuppose a standard by which we learn, think, feel, and act; ultimately, a standard by which we are judged. To everyone's detriment, the "basics" represent an exclusive club, one that reflects the standards of Western, or Eurocentric thinking. Molefi Kete Asante in his book The Afrocentric Idea (1987) informs us that Eurocentric thinking is the philosophical core of our public schools and that the truths of Aristotle and Plato (the truths that underpin Eurocentric thinking) do not represent universal truths. In fact, Asante claims that the Eurocentric thinking and scholarship seek to control the impoverished classes and to maintain dominance in the Western world, in essence, to keep the status quo (1987):

"The protectors of the basest Eurocentric theory, with its racist focus, describe their ethos as the universal ethos, encompassing the only correct view" (Asante, 1987, p. 165). This Platonic notion of knowing the world is based on man as an isolated thinker removed from subjective confines of a social context.

"Plato was committed to philosophical solitude; social intercourse necessarily destroys the philosophical act. Furthermore, Plato rejected the realm of appearance; the sense world only distracts and confuses the philosopher" (Asante, 1987 p. 137). As we shall soon see, the Platonic idea of the rhetorician as isolated thinker is counter to the Afrocentric ways of knowing.

Writing teachers need to listen to Asante, Smitherman, Karenga, and others who call for a new rhetoric in the classroom, one that encompasses the "Afrocentric idea."

I teach twelfth grade English and composition in a school that has about a 60 percent minority population, most of whom are Afro-American. (an ugly irony here in calling the Afro-American students a minority population) Like most composition teachers today, I adhere to the tenets of the process methodology and try to keep up with the state-of-the-art thinking on composition instruction. Within this process paradigm, I have tried to focus on thinking skills and invention techniques, and ways to allow for the divergent voices of the students.

By the same token, I have adhered to Donald Murray's thinking that student writing must be evaluated accordingly:

Is there a subject? Does it say anything?
Is it worth saying? Is it focused? Is it documented? Is it ordered? Are the parts developed? Is the writing clear? Do the sentences work? Do the paragraphs work? Are the nouns specific? Is the spelling correct? Does the punctuation clarify? (1980)

From an Afrocentric perspective, these questions (ones that are inherent to evaluation [GRADING]) make Eurocentric presuppositions about the writer that could be unrealistic and discriminatory. The philosophical foundation of Murray's criteria demand an appeal to logic through a student's ability to decenter, that is, to stand apart from the writing and to judge it from a dispassionate stance, to be objective and to be aware of a hypothetical audience. This hypothetical stance assumes a rhetoric outside of social context.

Being outside of a social context is a crucial distinction between the Eurocentric and the Afrocentric forms of rhetoric. Oral delivery is the primary rhetorical mode for Afro-Americans, a mode essentially forced upon them by anti-literacy laws during the slave days (Asante 1987 p.83). Therefore black rhetoric required verbal interaction and vocal acceptance. Geneva Smitherman in her book, Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America (1977), defines the verbal interaction and vocal acceptance as the "call-response" process.

The African-derived communication process of call-response may be briefly defined as follows: spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements ("calls") are punctuated by expressions ("responses") from the listener. In the traditional black church, call-response is often referred to as the congregation's way of "talking back" to the preacher, the most well-known example of which is "A-men." (1977 p. 104)

The "call-response" process is a fundamental element of black discourse, however, an element that would limit the creative rhetorical devices of black students in the traditional classroom. The written word does not allow for verbal performance and audience response, both so crucial to the Afrocentric ways of knowing and expressing. Modern composition theories just do not account for vocalized audience reaction as a rhetorical prompt.

A second major stumbling block for black students in the classroom is what Asante calls "indirection." Asante says of this stylistic feature:

The African American speaker often approaches the central issues of talk in a circuitous fashion, in the manner of cultural temperament, with lyricism and indirection. By 'stalking' the issues, the speaker demonstrates skill and arouses interest. The person who goes directly to the issues is said to have little imagination and even less flair for rhetorical style. (1987 p. 18)

Notice two criteria that Murray uses for evaluating student writing: "Is it focused? Is it ordered?," neither of which

account for "stalking." I'm not laying all the blame on Murray. In all my years of schooling, I have never had a professor tell me to take my time about getting to the subject, to relax and enjoy the moment of reader anticipation, to have a little reader foreplay. The new rhetoric simply does not embrace the Afrocentric way of knowing.

Teachers encourage their students to establish an ethos, a voice of authority in their writing. This ethos is usually demonstrated by exhaustive research that generates authoritative documentation, a plethora of examples and illustrations, and objective Aristotelian logic. In essay writing, little emphasis is placed on subjective, emotional, or sixth sense awareness. Again, the clash between Eurocentric and Afrocentric paradigms plays an integral part in teacher expectations of student writing. One of the most creative aspects distinguishing black rhetoric is what Asante calls styling. "Styling refers to the conscious or unconscious manipulation of language or mannerisms to influence favorably the hearers of the message "(Asante, p 39). Styling is a way of establishing black ethos. In order to achieve this black ethos, however, a speaker must use behavior to influence the audience, usually styled by visual or audio media;(Asante p39) again, audience response predicates the speaker's success or failure. Rap music would be an example of styling, and few young black men or women question the ethos of 2 Live Crew.

Sound and behavior in black rhetoric are as inextricably

connected as Aristotle to syllogisms in Eurocentric rhetoric. "The sound of words can often assume as much importance as presentation of arguments in such situations." (Asante, p84) Asante suggests that in many cases black rhetoricians make no attempt to appeal to a Eurocentric logic, but rather to a subjective or emotional sense of the soul--- to form rather than content. Unfortunately, styling sounds and behaviors is an unacceptable mode of discourse in the average composition class.

Finally, and most significantly, black rhetoric doesn't want to speak Eurocentric rhetoric. In fact, according to Asante black rhetoric is the voice of revolution, a statement of outrage toward the Eurocentric oppressors. "Black phallus in your white belly" (Asante p. 106); "A black snake crawling up your leg," is the voice of the mythical Stagolee, "the radical impulse to challenge an authority that seeks to repress freedom, improvisation, and harmony" (Asante p.106).

Stagolee was the prototype bad man in the sense that nobody bothered him, the embodiment of a myth that emphasizes toughness. Stagolee is the myth that allows the African American to rail against violence to shoot, to cut, to maim, to kill--if that is necessary to restore a sense of dignity. (108)

Do you think that these words mean that we better start paying attention to the black rhetoric and start changing our system?, a rhetorical question to ask the world of rhetoric! If you think that Stagolee is not alive and well, you live in an awfully

white world, a world in which Stagolee wants a voice. Do you hear my voice changing in this paper? It has! I'm afraid!!, I'm afraid that nobody's really listening, and I'm afraid of the consequences. I reiterate that I cannot speak for the blacks, but I can speak for the whites: White education wants the harmony of equality as long as we can teach the blacks white talk, white thinking, white culture; black man with a "white" picket fence living side-by-side with a white man with a "white" picket fence, unless painted on that white picket fence are the words of Stagolee, "black phallus in your white belly." The black women and men were physically enslaved by the whites in the previous century and are being intellectually enslaved in the twentieth century.

We **MUST** listen to and acknowledge the unique cultural distinctions of black rhetoric. Listen to the words of a popular rap group called, significantly, **PUBLIC ENEMY**:

"Fight the Power"

1989 the number another summer (get down)
Sound of the funky drummer
music hittin' your heart cause I know you got soul
(Brothers and sisters, hey)
Listen if you're missin' y'all
swingin' while I'm singin'
Givin' what cha gettin'
Knowin' what I know
While the black band's sweatin'
And the rhythm rhymes rollin'
Got to give us what we want
Gotta give us what we need
Our freedom of speech is freedom or death
We got to fight the powers that be
Lemme hear you say
Fight the power

CHORUS

As the rhythm designed to bounce
What counts is that the rhythms
Designed to fill your mind
now that you've realized the pride's arrived
We got to pump the stuff to make us tough
From the heart
It's a start, a work of art
To revolutionize make a change nothin's strange
People, people we are the same
No, we're not the same
Cause we don't know the game
What we need is awareness, we can't get careless
you say what is this?
My beloved let's get down to business
mental self-defensive fitness
(YO) Bum rush the show
You gotta go for what you know
Make everybody see, in order to fight the powers that
be
Lemme hear you say
Fight the power

CHORUS

Elvis was a hero to most
But he never meant shit to me you see
Straight up racist that sucker was
Simple and plain
Mother fuck him and John Wayne
Cause I'm black and I'm proud
I'm ready and hyped plus I'm amped
Most of my heroes don't appear on those stamps
Sample a look back you look and find
Nothing but red-necks for four hundred years if you
check
Don't worry, be happy
Was a number one jam
Damn if I say it, you can slap me right here
(Get it) Let's get this party started right
Right on, come on
What we got to say
Power to the people, no delay
To make everybody see
In order to fight the powers that be

(Fight the power)

"Fight The Power," the power, that's us, the white man and white
woman, the Eurocentric, the composition teachers of Aristotelian

logic, of illustrations and examples, of de-centering and de-synthesizing, of objectivity and being specific, that's us denying the voice, denying the freedom, denying the power.

"People, people, we're the same, NO we're not the same! cause we don't know the game." Yet, we want to treat everyone the same, the rallying cry of educated people with love in our hearts, integration on our minds, and racism in our bones.

In a way, it's real simple; we want blacks to value what we value and to share in our world; yet, we choose not to value what they value because we don't want to share in their world. The proof is in our textbooks, our lesson plans, our criteria for evaluation; the proof is in our educational system. No small wonder that black students are underachieving in our classrooms; we don't seem to want what they are, what Afrocentric culture demands they are; How much longer can we continue to deny our bias? But, we do!! No small wonder I'm afraid.

However, I find hope and guidance in the words of PUBLIC ENEMY. "Revolutionize" is a hopeful word, to make change, albeit drastic, is still to make change rather than to make war. We, the teachers, must allow blacks to make that change before more drastic measures are taken. Second, "the pride's arrived," the pride to look back into a culture that defines, provides meaning, a pride that stems from identifying their heritage with Afrocentricity, a pride in a culture that does not acknowledge John Wayne and Elvis Presley as icons, a pride that does not accept the historical context of 400 years

of racism.

O.K., WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT IT?

Some tentative truths arise from the ashes: (1) Everyone wants to be valued; (2) understanding leads to valuing; (3) fear is almost always the culprit in human misunderstandings. Appropriately, PUBLIC ENEMY's rap album is entitled Fear of a Black Planet: "The Counter Attack On World Supremacy." Blacks are afraid that whites are afraid to live in a black world. Only understanding can alleviate the fear.

SOME RADICAL BUT IMPERATIVE NOTIONS::

1. Bring rap music into the classroom.

For once, and it's about time, the expert in the classroom is the black student. Let the students write rap lyrics; let them write about rap lyrics; explore the pop culture of Afrocentricity. There will be problems at first, like any radical shift in thinking. Remember, black rhetoric is the voice of oppression, and many of the songs purposely exclude the whites from sharing the code. My experience, however, is that when the young black students see that their culture is valued, they will allow you glimpses of insight into the black world. There will be setbacks. The blacks students are

rightfully suspicious and skeptical of our motivations. Sometimes the students will purposefully lead you in the wrong directions and howl with laughter at your ignorance. At first, they might be sullen and unresponsive; persevere, at heart the black students want peace and harmony, but only if you value their Afrocentricity. Don't just say you value it; show it! Change the focus of the classroom.

2. Let the study of rap music lead into a study of the origins of what the rappers are saying.

Most of my black students, although acknowledging their Afrocentricity, have little or no understanding of the historical context of the African cultural history, and my white students are even less knowledgable. Darryl James, writing for Rappin' The Magazine, says of the rap group **JUNGLE BROTHERS** (there is an "in your face, white man," name of a group!):

The Jungle Brothers are coming from an Afrocentric place with cuts like "Acknowledge Your Own History," and "Black Woman," where it is all too crucial to have a firm knowledge of your own self, and your own mind. Mike G. explains that what is most important to himself and to the brothers is "knowing and understanding myself, knowing where we fit in this world today. It gives us a clearer look at some of the problems that happen between blacks and whites." (p. 18)

I contend that it is equally important for the white people to understand that history. Begin with rap and work backwards into history: the writings of Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, Martin Luther King, and further back into time--Henry Highland Garnet and David Walker (Cummings, 1983).

3. Incorporate black studies across the curriculum at every level of education.

We must include black literature into our English classes, not merely an occasional short story, but a comprehensive study of black writers contributing to a collective awareness of the universality of the human condition; we must include a copious study of black history in the history classes, one that begins with the Egyptians and traces the Afrocentric idea up to modern man. In the words of Maulana Karenga, "Egypt will play, in a rethought and renewed African culture, the same role that the ancient Greco-Latin civilizations played in the Western culture "(Karenga, p. 411). We must include black art ,music, and rhetoric. The study of black history and literature is a study in oppression, a study of the mistakes of Western culture, a study of the arrogance of Western ethos. Even from the perspective of good ole Western pragmatism, ("we learn from our mistakes") the study of Afrocentric culture is syllogistically valid.

4. Get rid of tracking!!

My county school district begins to track students in the first grade. The students are tracked according to standardized tests, and, of course, the standards by which we judge are Eurocentric. By the time that the AfroAmerican students reach high school, most are in the lowest track.

5. Allow oral presentations (performances) of the students' written work.

During these presentations encourage vocal audience response; provide a showcase for those students who have the ability to evoke emotional reaction. These stylin' performances allow for the Afrocentric "voice," although this voice may be tied up in how the writer walks to the front of the room; the voice might be in the student's posture or the duration of the silence.

I realize that this paper has gone a long way from Murray and his evaluation process, but the extension is inevitable. To reshape the evaluation process in writing class is to reshape a way of thinking; to reshape thinking is to reshape the world. That ain't easy!!

I suspect that these ideas might seem unrealistic or even, to some people, unnecessary and hyperbolic. In fact, many blacks would not welcome the changes. A study done by Dorothy Williamson-Ige (1982) shows that no less than 80 percent of the black parents polled said that in an English class more importance should be placed on the study of Standard Written English. The suggestion here is that these parents wanted their children to learn the language of power; to be successful is to be Afro-Euro-centric. Maybe someday the world can be a cultural blend, but for right now the dichotomy remains and the proof is in the pudding. In my school system the black students are filling up the alternative education classes, and only about 5 percent go on to higher education. Because our

system tracks students from the first grade on, I see the results in my senior classes. My "academic" classes, the ones going on to college, are predominantly white and the "practical" classes, the ones where we are merely keeping them in school, are predominantly black. In essence, we have reconstructed segregated schools.

FEAR OF A BLACK PLANET cannot be ignored, but it doesn't have to be feared. Our classrooms can "Fight The Power." In the words of Public Enemy:

Black power 1990 is a collective means of self defense against the worldwide conspiracy to destroy the black race. It's a movement that only puts fear in those that have a vested interest in the conspiracy, or that think it's something other than what it actually is....United we stand, yes, divided we fall, together we can stand tall....Brothers gonna work it out! (1990)

Our classrooms have been a part of that "vested interest" because we have been a part of the "conspiracy."

Brothers AND US better work it out, or brothers gonna do it themselves, and there won't be a lot of harmony in the process!!

References

- Asante, M. K. (1987). The Afrocentric idea. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Cummings, M. S. (1983). Teaching the black rhetoric course. (Report No. CS-210-773). Washington, D.C.: Howard University, Department of Communication Arts and Sciences. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 286 183)
- James, D. (1990, September). The Jay Bees comin' through from the underground to the overground. Rappin' the Magazine. p. 18.
- Karenga, M. (1988). Black studies and the problematic of paradigm: The philosophical dimension. Journal of Black Studies, 18(4), 395-414.
- Public Enemy. (Singers). (1989). Fear of a black planet (Cassette Recording No. 45413). N.Y.: Columbia Recordings.
- Smitherman, G. (1977). Talkin' and testifyin': The language of black America. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Williamson-Ige, D. (1982). Rhetorical analysis and criticism of black rhetors on the black language controversy: Implications for education and society. (Report No. CS-504-050). Louisville, Ky: Speech Communication Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 227 516)